

Bright Questions USDA Officials on Fairness in Conservation Programs

WASHINGTON, DC – Today, Congressman Bobby Bright questioned two USDA officials on the specifics of certain conservation programs contained in the 2008 Farm Bill. Dave White, Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and Jonathan Coppess, Administrator of the Farm Service Agency (FSA) testified before the Conservation, Credit, Energy, and Research Subcommittee hearing on the implementation of the conservation title of the Farm Bill. Bright pressed White on problems specific to Alabama in the Agriculture Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) and Geographic Area Rate Caps (GARC) for land valuations in conservation programs.

Bright questioned White about disparities in GARCs for land valuations in conservation programs. Land values determine the price farmers are paid for land when they enter into federal conservation programs. Specifically, Lowndes County recently received its yearly GARC at a \$20 per acre increase from 2008 to 2009, while neighboring Wilcox County received a \$305 per acre increase. After learning about the issue from Lowndesboro Mayor Rick Pate during Congressman Bright's 93-city district tour, Bright's staff made inquiries and were told by the NRCS that there were no options for Lowndes County to appeal the rates.

Congressman Bright asked White what could be done to ensure that recourse was available to counties who believe they have received an inaccurate GARC. After noting that he was familiar with the Lowndes County issue, Chief White admitted that mistakes occurred in this particular case and would be corrected as soon as possible.

"I am more than aware of it, Mr. Bright. I've been contacted by your office, of course. You've taken a great interest in this," White responded to a question about Lowndes County.

"And here's the solution. The State Conservationist is going to go back and redo those Geographic Area Rate Caps," White continued. "So that's going to be redone. I will guarantee that Alabama, that those producers in that county have enough acreage, and if they chose to, to move forward into WRP. There's enough acres in the cap that Congress gave us that we can do that. So any producer who felt the amount kept them out will have that option in Fiscal Year 2010, which is what we are

in. We are going to redo those GARCs.”;

“This is a case where Lowndes County was clearly treated unfairly, but was not initially given an opportunity to appeal its land valuations through the NRCS,” Bright said. “I applaud Chief White’s attention to this matter, and I urge the NRCS to act quickly to address this disparity. Lowndes County should not be put at such a disadvantage. I look forward to working with the NRCS to prevent similar situations from occurring in the future.”;

Bright also questioned White on AWEF. In the 2008 Farm Bill, Congressman Terry Everett created AWEF, which allows the NRCS to lend technical and financial assistance to farmers for water conservation efforts on agricultural lands. It is important for Alabama farmers because it helps them address long-standing irrigation challenges. However, at the end of July, \$58 million in AWEF funding was awarded, but Alabama was not initially included while Texas received over \$10 million and California over \$18 million. Bright questioned the inequity in the system and asked NRCS Chief Dave White how they ensure fair distribution of funds.

“My predecessor created AWEF with Alabama farmers in mind, yet they have seen little benefit from this program,” Bright said. “Farmers around the country suffer from drought and irrigation issues, and everyone deserves a fair chance at accessing this important program. Alabama is certainly no exception. I appreciate Chief White’s answers, but there is more to be done to ensure that farmers in my district are able to benefit from this vital conservation measure.”;

Below are questions that Congressman Bright asked (as prepared):

1. Recently, NRCS awarded over \$58 million in water quality improvement projects, of which my state was initially not included, while other states—though I do not question their need—were awarded between \$10 and \$18 million. Could you describe the process for awarding AWEF contracts, detailing how you ensure an equitable distribution of the funds across the country?

2. As you mention in your testimony, in fiscal year 2009, 3,800 applications were submitted and less than 1,400 were awarded contracts. What determines an application’s eligibility or ineligibility? Could you provide more detail regarding your plan for the development of a “team to review the fiscal year 2009 implementation” of AWEF?

3. The Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) is another vitally important program for my district. Several of my constituents have complained about a lack of transparency in the Geographic Area Rate Caps land valuation process, and claim a discriminatory result based upon county. My staff has been in contact with both state and federal NRCS staff, but we have not been able to make any progress in determining a solution to this issue. Furthermore, we have

been informed that the counties claiming discrimination have been offered no recourse or path to appeal the land value they were given. It is my understanding that the 2008 Farm Bill included an appeals process for Geographic Area Rate Caps land valuations, but it appears that recourse is, in certain circumstances, being denied at the state level. Are you aware of this issue? If so, how can NRCS ensure that our counties have a viable option for appealing decisions made in regard to land value?